

How to make business intelligence work for your organisation

Clive Longbottom, Service Director

Quocirca Comment

A brief history of business intelligence

The last few years have seen a flurry of activity in the business intelligence (BI) markets. Firstly, the old-style approach of reporting against data in a relatively static manner was put under pressure by users demanding something a lot more flexible, where they did not need to approach the IT department every time they needed to create a report. Then, the big suppliers decided they needed BI tools they could control, rather than embedding an OEM copy of a standard engine (generally Crystal Reports) into their systems. IBM acquired Cognos and SPSS, Oracle Hyperion and SAP Business Objects. Even some smaller suppliers got in on the act - relative newcomer Spotfire went to Tibco, the middleware supplier.

This flurry of activity presented issues to many users - if they were running a heterogeneous environment, how rich would the functionality of one supplier's BI engine be against another, competitive supplier's systems? Would bringing Cognos into an Oracle environment be a foot in the door for IBM to try and move the organisation over to DB2?

The space in the market for independent BI providers soon began to fill up - suppliers such as Information Builders, Panorama Software and Tableau Software have all let users know there are alternatives available to whatever they may be using to date. The largest remaining independent supplier, SAS Institute, continues to dominate as a specialist BI supplier.

Cloud-based computing is giving greater reach to many of these suppliers. Spotfire has provided a hosted version of its software for many years and Panorama - through a partnership with Google - offers its capabilities as a BI software-as-a-service (SaaS) offering.

Open-source alternative to proprietary BI tools

But the biggest problem remains the cost of BI. If a business' main asset is its information - its intellectual property - BI needs to be widespread across its employee base, so everyone can add value to the data at their disposal. By providing BI tools only to those deemed at a sufficiently high level, BI ceases to deliver what it promises - and becomes a niche tool.

Open source could provide the answer here. There is a broad open source BI project, known as BIRT, the business intelligence and reporting tools project. Actuate has the best known distribution of this, but others provide alternatives under open source banners that may offer greater overall functionality.

The main players here are JasperSoft and Pentaho, both of which have "community editions" of their software that are free to download and implement, with support being community-based. Their commercial editions are enterprise subscription licences based on the number of CPUs, so broad adoption can be made without the need to deal with per-user issues. Others not using open source but having low cost approaches (and often a free usage version or at least free evaluation version) include QlikTech and Panopticon.

Buyers must understand there is a cost to everything. Free, open source software (FOSS) is not free - even when you take the community version. It is free of licence, but has implementation and support costs. Subscription software has on-going, predictable costs, and commercial, off-the-shelf software (COSS) may have up-front licence costs along with on-going maintenance charges. The final choice comes down to other issues - as detailed above - and

applying suitable business wisdom in the search for meaningful intelligence.

How to choose the right BI system for your business

When it comes to choosing the right BI direction for your organisation, Quocirca recommends the following as basic pointers:

- **Is a single supplier solution important to you?** If so, look to the tools from the incumbent (e.g. IBM, Oracle, SAP), but negotiate hard around existing contracts. On the whole, this will tend to restrict you to a smaller number of active BI seats, with the capability to distribute the reports from the analysis.
- **Do you want an independent BI system that can work across a more heterogeneous system?** Look to the remaining independents or semi-independents such as SAS Institute and Tibco Spotfire. These may still be expensive at a per seat level, but will often come with tools to manage deep domain expertise areas, such as oil and gas, pharmaceutical and finance data analysis.
- **Can you provide your own systems support, and are you in a position to enable a suitable number of support staff to build up their own knowledge of the chosen system?** If so, then community editions of BI tools may meet your requirements. This would provide the most scalable BI system - but you need to watch out for any lack of functionality that may be in some community editions.

- **Do you want a fully supported system, but also want broad adoption capabilities?** Then look for supported versions of open source tools, or for commercial systems that do not charge on a per user basis.

For many, it will come down to a hybrid solution - but certain key areas must be borne in mind:

- **Everyone must be analysing the same information.** Different BI tools looking at different information silos do not provide business intelligence - it gives chaos.
- **One person's great BI tool is another's incapability to see the results.** Bar and pie charts may be pretty easy for everyone to understand, but not all data is well suited to bar or pie charts. Heat maps, spider charts, geo-data representations, bubble charts, you name it may all have meanings to certain people, but do not assume that any one way of viewing data will suit everyone. Look for tools that enable the user to change the visualisation method to one that suits them best. If multiple BI tools are chosen to give different viewing capabilities - see the point above re information silos.
- **"Live" reports have pros and cons.** Web-based output which allows users to see the analysis of the live data is great, unless what was required was a snapshot in time. Make sure that the differences are understood, and the right reports can be run against the right data.

This article first appeared on Computer Weekly, <http://www.computerweekly.com>

About Quocirca

Quocirca is a primary research and analysis company specialising in the business impact of information technology and communications (ITC). With world-wide, native language reach, Quocirca provides in-depth insights into the views of buyers and influencers in large, mid-sized and small organisations. Its analyst team is made up of real-world practitioners with first-hand experience of ITC delivery who continuously research and track the industry and its real usage in the markets.

Through researching perceptions, Quocirca uncovers the real hurdles to technology adoption – the personal and political aspects of an organisation's environment and the pressures of the need for demonstrable business value in any implementation. This capability to uncover and report back on the end-user perceptions in the market enables Quocirca to advise on the realities of technology adoption, not the promises.

Quocirca research is always pragmatic, business orientated and conducted in the context of the bigger picture. ITC has the ability to transform businesses and the processes that drive them, but often fails to do so. Quocirca's mission is to help organisations improve their success rate in process enablement through better levels of understanding and the adoption of the correct technologies at the correct time.

Quocirca has a pro-active primary research programme, regularly surveying users, purchasers and resellers of ITC products and services on emerging, evolving and maturing technologies. Over time, Quocirca has built a picture of long term investment trends, providing invaluable information for the whole of the ITC community.

Quocirca works with global and local providers of ITC products and services to help them deliver on the promise that ITC holds for business. Quocirca's clients include Oracle, Microsoft, IBM, O2, T-Mobile, HP, Xerox, EMC, Symantec and Cisco, along with other large and medium sized vendors, service providers and more specialist firms.

Full access to all of Quocirca's public output (reports, articles, presentations, blogs and videos) can be made at <http://www.quocirca.com>